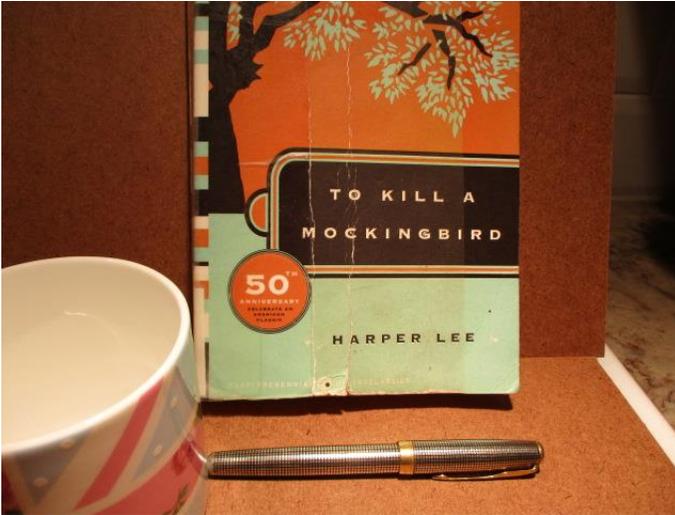


To Kill a Mockingbird

By Rod Fraser



IN THE LAST page of this wonderful book, Scout muses to herself, “I [knew] Jem and I would get grown [soon enough], but there wasn’t much left for us to learn, except possibly Algebra”.

It was an astute observation. This novel tells of three eventful years in the lives of Jean Louise Finch (‘Scout’), a precocious six year old at the start of the story, her older brother, Jem, and their friend, Dill, a young lad who visits Maycomb each summer. They learn plenty of life lessons during the course of this story and I plan to set them all out in these pages.

But before I start, I want to tell you a bit about the author, Harper Lee (1926–2016), who also led an interesting and unusual life during her early years in Alabama, and then later in the City of New York. In her last few years, after suffering a stroke, she returned to Alabama to live in an assisted-living facility in Monroeville. Her sister, Alice, still practicing law at the age of 95, was there to help.

As an interesting aside, Alice practiced law until she was 100 years of age, and lived three more years until she died at age 103.

Harper Lee was the youngest child of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch. Her father, Amasa, earned his living as a lawyer, served in the Alabama State Legislature and was part owner of the local newspaper. He was the inspiration for Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Frances was a homemaker. She brought up their four children in the small town of Monroeville during the early years of the twentieth century. She also suffered from what we now know as 'bi-polar disorder' and seldom left the house.

After finishing high school, Harper Lee attended Huntington College for a time, then transferred to the University of Alabama. In her junior year, she entered the law school, but it wasn't a good fit. She

much preferred to spend her time writing for the student newspaper and humor magazine. She came to realize that writing, rather than the practice of law, was what she wanted to do with her life.

Lee left the university, without graduating, and moved to New York City in 1949 to do just that. She soon found employment as an airline reservation agent and worked fulltime until the mid-1950s, while writing on the side.

In 1957, she finished the manuscript for what would become *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It wasn't ready for publication; it required a lot of work. But her editor felt "the spark of the true writer flashed in every line". With her publisher's encouragement, Harper Lee worked steadily on the changes, revising and rewriting it for the next two years.

It wasn't easy work. It required hours to produce one good page of writing each day. "Contrary to what people think, there is no glamour to writing. In fact, it's heartbreak most of the time", Lee told an audience at a talk she delivered in the 1960s.

When the book was finally ready for publication, she chose Harper Lee as her pen name. Her full name was Nelle Harper Lee (Nelle to friends and family). Nelle was her grandmother's name spelled backwards. Her parents chose Harper as her middle

name to honor a doctor who was close to the family.

To Kill a Mockingbird was published in 1960 and was an immediate success. Harper Lee won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961. A few years ago, the BBC reported that annual sales of *To Kill a Mockingbird* were in excess of 750,000 copies. It has made Lee a very wealthy woman. Her net worth at the time of her death was estimated to be in the range of \$35 million.

In 1962, her book was made into a movie, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, and Mary Badham as 'Scout'. Robert Duvall made his film debut as Boo Radley, going on to become a well-known actor in the years ahead.

The film was an immediate box office hit, enjoyed positive reviews from critics, was nominated for best picture and won Gregory Peck an Academy award for best actor. It has continued to charm moviegoers over the years. It is simply a wonderful film and you should give it a try. Most libraries have a copy, and if not, you can buy the DVD from Amazon.

ONE OF THE interesting things about Harper Lee's life was that she never wrote another book (excepting *Go Set a Watchman*, which was published in 2015, but written in the 1950s—a first draft of what would become *To Kill a Mockingbird*).

It is unusual for an author to give up writing after just one book. But there was no financial need to continue; the experience of writing and rewriting *To Kill a Mockingbird* wore her out emotionally; and the subsequent publicity overwhelmed her. Harper Lee liked a solitary life. She once said, "I wouldn't go through the pressure and publicity I went through with *To Kill a Mockingbird* for any amount of money."

THIS NOVEL IS divided into three parts, each riveting in its own way. The first part tells of the lives of three young children growing up during the depression in small town Alabama. The father of two of the children is Atticus Finch, a small town lawyer who also sits in the Alabama State Legislature (when in session).

Atticus is widowed and the rearing of his children, Jean Louise ('Scout') and Jeremy ('Jem') is largely left to their housekeeper, a colored woman named Calpurnia. The discipline of the kids is lax. They have the run of the neighborhood from early morning to late at night. This was not unusual. Even in the 1950s, when I grew up in rural Ontario, children were largely left to look after themselves, and for the most part, they did a pretty good job of it.

The third child, Charles Baker Harris ('Dill'), hails from Meridian, Mississippi. He is spending the

summer with his Aunt Rachel and continues to do so over the course of this story.

The three children (Scout—almost 6; Jem—nearly 10; and Dill—going on 7) were a good match in terms of age and interests. They quickly developed an imaginary world that centers on their mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley.

Boo had an unfortunate (but minor) run-in with the law during his teenage years and hasn't left the family home for years (except late at night). His father is regularly seen about town, but Boo remains invisible to the town folk.

Or so it seems. The author is vague about many of the facts concerning Boo Radley, and it is left to the three children to conjure up strange and horrific tales about Boo, from their fertile imagination and an abundance of town gossip.

This part of the book introduces us to the social life of small town Alabama in a simpler time. It is an affectionate look at what children learn as they make their way to maturity. As you turn the pages, you can't help but marvel at Lee's skill as a writer.

We learn about the children's attempts to get Boo Radley to show himself, and their interactions with other children in the community. One young lad,

Walter Cunningham, is invited to eat lunch with Jem and Scout at their home, only to find his table manners mocked by Scout. She is strongly reprimanded by Calpurnia and Atticus. It is a lesson she doesn't forget.

THE SECOND PART of the book deals with the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man, who is accused of raping a white woman in town. Atticus is asked by the local judge to defend Robinson, a task that does not make him popular among his neighbors.

This is another part of small town life in the south of the 1930s. Lee does not spare us from the bigotry of the times and the difficulty of being a black man accused of rape in a hostile community. Although the evidence is clear that Robinson did not commit this crime, he is still convicted by the jury.

Although Atticus is hopeful of a reversal on appeal, Tom Robinson has no such illusions. He attempts to escape from jail with the hope the guards will shoot him dead. He is not disappointed.

Scout and Jem watch the trial from the gallery, and become convinced of Tom's innocence. They are shocked with his conviction and subsequent death at the hands of his guards. They must reconcile these facts with their new understanding of the world.

THE FINAL PART of the book deals with the danger Atticus' children now face as a result of the trial. When he defended Tom Robinson, Atticus attacked the credibility of the Ewell family. He convincingly showed it was likely Tom Robinson was invited to have sex with Mayella Ewell, and it was her father, Bob Ewell, who beat her when he discovered this.

Bob Ewell was humiliated from the evidence given at the trial and wanted revenge. Weeks later, he attacks Scout and Jem on their way home from a Halloween party. They might have been killed if it weren't for Boo Radley intervening and stabbing Ewell during the struggle.

Jem has a broken arm and is unconscious. He is carried home by Boo, with Scout trailing behind. The sheriff is called to investigate. In an effort to protect Boo and the private world he has chosen for himself, the sheriff concludes Ewell tripped over a tree root and fell on his own knife.

The book finishes with Scout musing, "Jem and I would get grown soon, but there wasn't much left for us to learn." So it seems.

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